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ABSTRACT

An undergraduate course in children's literature was developed at De Montfort University in Bedford, England, United Kingdom (UK). In a children's literature course for first year students from a variety of backgrounds, age groups, and future intents, it is important to consider the discourse of children's literature, to trace intertextual reference, to look for evidence of overt and covert ideology in a text, to explore the metafictive nature of picture books, and to identify different kinds of linguistic playfulness. The paper addresses constructing a module for first and second year course content, and considers whether picture books are for children. Class participants are encouraged to see picture books as particularly challenging, multilayered texts. Recognizing intertextual reference in illustrations can be the start to an exploration of the multilayered nature of texts for both child and adult readers. The paper describes one class session, and provides examples from children's books by J. R. R. Tolkein, Alan Garner, J. M. Barrie, Enid Blyton, Roald Dahl, and Maurice Sendak, among others. (Contains 26 references.) (SWC)

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Where Are the Children in Children's Literature? Teaching Children's Literature to Undergraduates

by
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Discussing Garner's Onion

It is late afternoon on a Friday at the end of the fifth week of *Children's Literature One*. The cohort of 75 first year undergraduate BA/Bed students have been lectured on fantasy, they have been encouraged to consider definitions of what they understand as fantasy fiction and to give examples from their own reading, to question whether the wide range of works that they are suggesting, folk and fairy tales, myths and legends, allegories, dream texts, science fiction, horror and surrealism can constitute a single genre. The lecturer has referred to Rosemary Jackson's suggestion that what these examples do have in common is a "violation of what is generally accepted as possibility" and that there "is an instability of narrative at the center of the fantastic as a mode." It has also been suggested that fantasy may have a subversive function (Jackson, 1981, p. 34) as well as the potential to "act as a critique of current social values" (Stephens, 1992, p. 112) as fantasy may involve "the invention of an alterity of time and place which serves to comment on... the present and its values."

They have looked at some examples on the overhead projector of the topography of fantasies, *Earthsea, Middle Earth,* Winnie the Pooh and Christopher Robin's territory; they have looked at Tenniel's picture of Alice climbing through the looking glass, and they are ready for Tolkien's definition of what happens when an author creates a "Secondary World which your mind can enter." (Tolkien, 1947, p. 30).

They have been invited to reflect on last week's session on E. Nesbit when they were reminded of the influence of George MacDonald on children's writers at the turn of the century. The idea of the marchen or magic tale was introduced in the first lecture of the course when they were invited to share the wide range of fairy tales they had forgotten that they knew and to begin to consider them as the beginning of children's literature and its continuing intertextual warp and weave.

Now that they are looking at J. R. R. Tolkien and Alan Garner, folk and fairy tale structures are never far away. "...an ordinary mortal is drawn into a magical adventure during which he or she matures and after which he or she returns home." (Sullivan, 1992, p. 102-3). The lecture has ended with a reflection from Susan Cooper, "The fantasist deals with the substance of myth; the deep archetypal patterns of emotion and behavior... the echo of myth runs through fairy tales from every culture, every tradition; in our own literature it runs through *Pilgrim's Progress to Gulliver's Travels, Alice in Wonderland* to the *Wizard of Oz*, from MacDonald to Tolkien, from Lewis to Le Guin." (Cooper, 1990, p. 308).

During the second hour of the Friday afternoon session, they have watched the penultimate episode of the recent BBC TV version of Garner's *Elidor* and briefly considered the way the supernatural and fantastic elements of the text, Roland's "hallucinations", have been portrayed, contrasting effectively with the sunlit ordinariness of the children's everyday family life. They comment on the way that the seance through which the children contact the land of Elidor in the text has been replaced by the complex graphics of a computer game in the television version, a device which not only brings the story into the 1990s but avoids the possible reaction of adults to the dangers of children attempting to contact a spirit world. This may be the first time in this session that they have discussed the child reader or viewer.

After a well deserved tea break, they divide into smaller seminar groups for more detailed discussion of the two texts. This is where we came in; a group of about twelve students has been discussing questions set by the lecturer; they have rightly abandoned these to explore their own agenda. One group member is tackling the contention of another, that "children would not read all this into it," with a spirited reference to Alan Garner's assertion that, "... the book must be written for all levels of experience," and that that is precisely what has been happening to them as students. They are all coming to the text from different perspectives, some with a background of

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English Literature at an advanced level, others like herself, as mature students who are engaging in full time academic study for the first time and who had never thought of children's literature as a subject for academic study before. She is able to take Garner's metaphor of the book as an onion, which, "can be peeled down through its layers but is always at every level, an onion, whole in itself." (Garner, 1977, p. 196-8) and apply it to the process they are engaging in as students.

Another small group are tackling heavy issues arising from their reading of *The Hobbit*. What is Tolkien saying about war, about ethnicity and class? Aren't the Goblins in fact the Jews? Who or what is Bilbo? A mature student thinks he is the Id. One of the younger students has read everything that Tolkien has written, he claims that *The Hobbit* was the first book that he ever read and having read Tolkien's autobiography he is able to lay what he considers some rather fanciful interpretations to rest! When I hear one student remark that what we learn from both texts is that life is a quest and that we learn to cope with it by facing up to a series of hard challenges. I feel moved to interrupt them and suggest that at the end of the week and the last day of their term, they might like to stop facing this particular challenge and go home.

Constructing a Module

This thumb nail sketch suggests something of the complexity of the content of this course and the enthusiasm of the students. Putting together a modular course for first year students for a variety of backgrounds and age groups, all with different destinations in mind, was a challenge. Before the new modular degree was introduced in 1992, Children's Literature had been a well established feature of a four year Bachelor of Education degree course, a subject deemed suitable for intending primary teachers. Suddenly, we were invited to introduce it as a module (fifteen weeks, thirty hours) in the English and Cultural Studies pathway. Overcoming a certain amount of skepticism, if not prejudice from one's Bachelor of Arts colleagues was the first challenge. No way was this course to be seen as a soft option if we were to gain credibility. The first attempt two years ago, left the enormous group of first years clamoring for more. We had to produce a second level course. Colleagues seemed to be slightly suspicious about the scale of the course's popularity and genuinely surprised when ten BA students, reaching the third year, chose children's literature for their final year dissertations.

We were clear about one thing, on a combined BA and BEd course, there had to be more emphasis on critical theory and less on children! The questions raised by Peter Hunt (Hunt, 1991) about finding an appropriate critical approach to texts written for children and his argument for a "childish criticism" was a possible starting point, but the critical perspectives that the students were encountering in other literature modules also needed to be addressed in the Children's Literature course. In the first year of the course, it would be important to consider the discourse of children's literature (is there one?) and to trace intertextual reference, to look for evidence of overt and covert ideology in a text, explore the metafictive nature of picture books and identify different kinds of linguistic playfulness. In the first year, many of the English and Cultural Studies students were coming to terms with new ways of reading texts; dealing with new concepts and terminology; perhaps applying these to familiar and essentially non-threatening texts could be a help. In their second year we tried to do this in a more focused way.

Second Year - More of the Same or Something Different?

The second year course therefore, brought more specific issues to bear on old and new texts; starting with Enid Blyton and Roald Dahl. Were these safe or challenging texts? Looking at Blyton as a consummate writer of popular fiction enabled students to cross refer to the popular fiction module and to counter some of the negative criticism that seems to stifle any explanation of her enormous commercial success and popularity. Every student has read and enjoyed her books, perhaps we could lessen the guilty apologetic admission to this by bringing some sharp critical analysis to bear on her texts. Applying Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque to Dahl's *BFG* and *Danny the Champion of the World* seemed to give students access to a way of explaining Dahl's excesses in a particularly positive way.

The texts of the novel and the play, *Peter Pan*, coming next, seemed to raise a range of issues and much to discuss; the instability of the text, the idea of the text as a "supra-textual core" a "textual sun" surrounded by any number of satellite texts (Hollindale, 1993, p. 158). Is it a utopian text or one dogged by an intrusive authorial interference; Jacqueline Rose's analysis of

what she calls "a confusion of tongues" and the argument for the "impossibility of children's fiction" (Rose, 1985, p. 66) and there are other "satellites", screen versions by Disney and Spielberg to be considered.

As with Blyton and Dahl there were few students who were not familiar with a version of the Peter Pan story, a quick review of their knowledge suggested that they were aware of the plot, characters and settings although few could attribute this to having read any particular version. This reinforced the notion of Peter Pan as "the universally understood, familiar, instant-symbol myth figure of childhood agelessness." (Hollindale, 1993, p. 19) and the possibility of many texts, often the ones we have read as children, becoming "part of a general consciousness, obscurely familiar even to those who have never read...the original story," (Hollindale, 1993, p. 172).

Discussion of the two *Peter Pan* texts opened up the possibility that many of the early texts that had been written or adapted for children have been richly generative and reinforced the idea (Stephens, 1992, p. 86) that we return to on the course, that children's literature has no discourse of its own but is profoundly inter-textual and allusive.

Having considered the possibility that the Never Never Land also presents a utopian and highly metafictive version of the world, the second year course moves on to Terry Pratchett's dystopian vision of the world in his *Truckers* series. Looking at science fiction also provided the opportunity to pick up and develop some of the ideas that had been introduced in their first year when they looked at picture books. Looking at science fiction comics like the *Judge Dredd* and *2000AD* series along with Terry Pratchett's graphic novels gives them the opportunity to revisit and try out some of the ideas they had been exploring in year one, particularly the metafictive and post modern elements of these texts.

Are Picture Books for Children?

The first year course devotes two three hour sessions to picture books, focusing on Browne, Burningham and Sendak with readings by Moss (1992), Lewis (1990) and Doonan (1994), among others, to encourage students to begin to see these books as particularly challenging, multilayered texts. For their end of module assignment, one of their options is to consider the ways in which the makers of picture books have appropriated metafictional features, such as excess, indeterminacy and boundary breaking. In their seminars they use a set of questions devised by my colleague, to work together in groups looking at picture books that they have brought to the session. The questions help them to read the text in a way that may be unfamiliar to them. Certainly many of the texts surprise them. "Was it piggy wallpaper before?" someone asks flicking back through Anthony Browne's *Piggy Book*; a group of younger students explore John Burningham's *Granpa* with a mature student, discussing what they describe as "the unexpected depths." "I've never seen anything like this before," she says, "of course I'm out of date!" Another student reading Browne's, *The Night Shimmy*, remarks with a newly acquired confidence that she can see, a "bit of Sendak." Indeed, Browne is paying homage to Sendak; the picture above Gwen Strauss' text, "The Night Shimmy always chose the best stories," shows Eric in bed reading a book that is evidently a copy of Sendak's, *In the Night Kitchen*. Allusions to Sendak's work and that of other authors' and artists' becomes part of the challenge of reading this text. Recognizing intertextual reference in illustrations can be the start to an exploration of the multilayered nature of texts for both child and adult readers.

Sendak has been the greatest help, or perhaps the greatest intellectual challenge, to students' presuppositions about children's literature. Just as they think they have got the hang of it, he comes up with something different. The first years study the trilogy, *Where the Wild Things Are, In the Night Kitchen* and *Outside Over There*, all of which challenge their notions of what or who picture books are for. After a seminar spent exploring the range and scale of Sendak's work in these three books, they are beginning to see patterns, recognizable leitmotifs, influences and origins, when *We are all in the dumps with Jack and Guy* knocks them all sideways again. Jane Doonan (1994, p. 166) has been particularly helpful in her analysis of this particular text and has given the students on these courses an idea, an anchor which is surely going to become a point of reference, rather like Garner's onion, on our ongoing discussion of how we, as adults who are in a sense excluded from the intended audience, can study children's literature. She writes of Sendak, that:

He has created something which does not conform to generic expectations about picture books as children's literature only. *Dumps* shares with certain other modern picture books a quality that was formerly the preserve of folk and fairy tales; an open address. Once upon a time the old stories were for everyone of those gathered round the fire to take and make what they could from them, but in recent days such stories have come to be seen as belonging only to childhood. Conversely, picture books used to be the property of children but may now take a form to which adults as well can respond in many different ways.

The notion of an "open address" along with Garner's belief that "the book must be written for all levels of experience" (Meek et al, 1977, p. 197) helps us to position ourselves as adult readers of children's books on a course which studies children's literature in the context of the academic study of adult literature.

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